

To Free the World: Harry Holland and the Rise of the Labour Movement in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific.

By James Robb.

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A biography of Harry Holland, the most prominent of Labour's early leaders, has been well overdue. Patrick O'Farrell's insubstantial and sometimes prejudiced account of his life and work, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*, appeared in 1964 and there has been nothing since except appearances as a minor player in other political biographies and essays.

James Robb has compiled a fulsome account of his life including not only his political activism and achievements over many decades, but also his religiosity and literary expertise as a journalist, pamphleteer, editor and versifier. He also delineates his early 'soapbox evangelist years' in Australia to his life as an early Labour Party activist in New Zealand, to his five-year editorship of Labour's influential *Maoriland Worker* newspaper and later the party leader from 1919 to his death in 1933 as his 'less frantic' activities as a politician, where his behaviour was, and had to be, less messianic within a standardised reformist framework.

Robb leaves no stone unturned. He delineates his family background on their small family farm near Canberra, to his membership of the Salvation Army – evangelising publicly for the cause – to his work as a compositor on a newspaper as a youth where he was introduced to the written word, which was transformative in that he learned to read and devour books and articles including, as time went on, political polemics. From his experiences of unemployment and poverty in the 1890s came his lifelong dedication to their elimination within the context of a growing emotional commitment to political socialism which stayed with him for the rest of his life.

From the 1890s onwards he was devoted to the elimination of poverty and through his literary and political activism; it became his life work. This was uncompromising and included three prison sentences for his public advocacy on behalf of the working class and the hardships they faced, particularly in times of strife. His politics from membership of the Australian Socialist League in 1892 to standing for various political configurations of the New Zealand Labour Party in 1914 and 1915 both nationally and locally, winning a parliamentary seat in 1918 and the party's leadership in 1919 is well documented. Harry Holland was seminal in helping to found the final version of the Labour Party and later became its leader in the House through the 1920s until his death in 1933.

He was an impressive orator and an assertive polemicist both of which Robb highlights impressively. His expansive *Tragic Story of the Waihi Strike* (co-written with Robert Ross and Francis Edward O'Brien) followed his observation of the bitter miners' strike in 1912. It was widely read, as was *Armageddon or Calvary*, his exposé of the treatment of conscientious objectors during World War One which interviewed three of the fourteen conscientious objectors who were 'kidnapped' and sent to France in order to try to make them fight in 1917. I was very pleased to read Robb's extensive relating of that story as *Armageddon or Calvary*

was one of this reviewer's primary sources for his book *Field Punishment No. 1: Archibald Baxter, Mark Briggs and New Zealand's Anti-Militarist Tradition*.

Unlike earlier accounts where this has been sparse, Robb delineates a broader advocacy beyond New Zealand in recounting Holland's outspoken opposition to the system of indentured labour in Fiji and his equally outspoken support for the Mau movement in Samoa. Robb notes the consequences for Holland, both negative and positive, for this commitment.

What is impressive in Robb's book is his attention to detail. It is comprehensively researched, highly readable and very thorough. While the narrative is largely based around Holland's words – his writings and his speeches – it leaves little space for assessment. Nonetheless this approach has brought together a more emotional heft to the book. Through these primary sources, straight from the horse's mouth so to speak, Holland 'comes alive' in a way that a strictly narrative approach could not achieve. The three appendices (publisher Roger Steele's description of Holland's funeral and its impact on the country; John A. Lee's memories of him; and Janet Fraser's tribute to him) also add to the story's poignancy.

There are some grizzles. His wife, Annie, whom he married in 1888, not only raised eight children often on her own, but also was his 'rock', unashamedly sharing his deep political convictions for the rest of their lives; she barely rates a mention. Secondly, this reviewer would have liked to have read more information on those who worked closely with Holland particularly during his time as a parliamentarian. Key public servants and their influence often get overlooked in political biographies.

Nonetheless these are small quibbles. I don't agree that the book is hagiographic, as has been suggested. It is satisfyingly balanced, righting the ideological ship in contrast to O'Farrell's earlier unbalanced tome. This is an important book. It fills a much-needed space in New Zealand's political historiography. In 2025, for this book Robb won the highly competitive Labour History Project's Bert Roth Award, which 'best depicts the history of work and resistance in New Zealand.' It was well deserved.